

## **What is Wisdom; Where is Peace - 9th August 2020 Rev Clare Stainsby**

Good morning everyone. It's good to be together again.

Times are still strange, and the way ahead is still far from clear. The news is confusing, the world is confusing, and while life goes on in this less than normal way to we've become accustomed, we continue to grapple with the need to see the next step we should take. If you're like me, you'll have an overwhelming desire for a little certainty that somehow seems to be missing at present.

And what is the next step? It feels for me like we need a bridge to get us from where we are now to where we need to be in order to move on. A broad sturdy solid bridge across which we can walk with confidence; that would be nice. But instead we're being offered stepping stones. Stepping stones through a fast moving river. They are unevenly spaced, and some of them are wobbly. And we move from one to the next, tentatively, trying to get our balance. The other side is hidden in the mist. The river flows fast and strong, and each step requires caution.

That's how it feels for me anyway. Can you relate to any of that? Two words keep coming constantly to my mind - the words "wisdom" and "peace". We so need to be wise in our decision making, in our words, in our actions. But knowing what is wise at this time is hard to define, and we flounder. It's easy to look back and say, we weren't wise as we could have been in this decision or that decision. But we aren't walking backwards - we're trying to inch forwards, and knowing what is wise is hard to identify. And in all the world's uncertainty, it's easy for us to criticise the seeming lack of wisdom in decisions and statements made by our leaders. We expect wisdom, and when it is lacking it's very easy to sneer. However, I doubt if any of us would in any way want to task that they have.

But what is wisdom right now? Where can we find true wisdom in the midst of confusion? And in locating that wisdom how can we also find a place of peace in ourselves, as we stumble into the next steps we must take? Clearly, as a Christian I believe that God in Christ is the answer to those questions. God is the source of wisdom and also the source of peace, and we need to tap into that source if we are find either or both of those things. Today I want to think about that as we look at the two reading set for today. But first a prayer and then a song.

Let us pray.

Living Lord our God, in a world of confusion and uncertainty, you are the one solid constant. And so we turn to you, our rock and our redeemer. We praise you

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and we worship you because we have found you to be worthy of all praise, and all trust. We thank you for the many times and occasions that we have sensed your presence, and seen your goodness at work in our lives. We believe in your wisdom at the heart of your creation. We seek that peace that comes through your Spirit at work in our lives. Living Lord, we look to you, and appeal to you for help. Show us the next step, and give us the confidence to take it. Receive our worship, receive our gratitude, receive our weaknesses and fears, and lead us onwards, one step at a time. Amen.

Let's share together in the Lord's Prayer

*Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your Name,  
Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.  
Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,  
Now and forever. Amen.*

Let's sing together our first hymn, which is Great is Thy Faithfulness. Once again, I want to thank people from around the circuit for adding their voices to today's hymns.

## **Hymn: Great Is Thy Faithfulness**

*Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father;  
There is no shadow of turning with Thee;  
Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not;  
As Thou hast been, Thou forever will be.*

*Great is Thy faithfulness! Great is Thy faithfulness!  
Morning by morning new mercies I see.  
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided;  
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!*

*Summer and winter and springtime and harvest,  
Sun, moon and stars in their courses above  
Join with all nature in manifold witness  
To Thy great faithfulness, mercy and love.  
Great is Thy faithfulness...*

*Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth  
Thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide;  
Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,  
Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!  
Great is Thy faithfulness...*



So thinking about wisdom, and peace, let's hear our first reading. Thank you, Pat.

**Reading: 1 Kings 19 : 9 - 18**

*Elijah came to a cave, where he spent the night. But the Lord said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Elijah replied, "I have zealously served the Lord God Almighty. But the people of Israel have broken their covenant with you, torn down your altars, and killed every one of your prophets. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me, too." "Go out and stand before me on the mountain," the Lord told him. And as Elijah stood there, the Lord passed by, and a mighty windstorm hit the mountain. It was such a terrible blast that the rocks were torn loose, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake there was a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire there was the sound of a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And a voice said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He replied again, "I have zealously served the Lord God Almighty. But the people of Israel have broken their covenant with you, torn down your altars, and killed every one of your prophets. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me, too." Then the Lord told him, "Go back the same way you came, and travel to the wilderness of Damascus. When you arrive there, anoint Hazael to be king of Aram. Then anoint Jehu grandson of Nimshi to be king of Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from the town of Abel-meholah to replace you as my prophet. Anyone who escapes from Hazael will be killed by Jehu, and those who escape Jehu will be killed by Elisha! Yet I will preserve 7,000 others in Israel who have never bowed down to Baal or kissed him!"*

Amen

One thing that strikes me about that passage is the sheer violence of life of Old Testament times. Why was Elijah on the run? Because he'd gone up against the priests of another religion in a demonstration of the power of their respective gods. No amount of pleading and raving and sacrifices on behalf of the other priests could prove that their god existed. But a prayer alone from Elijah produced a result that proved the point. When the people watching saw that Elijah's God was the one who acts, they turned on the false prophets and killed all 450 of them, with the help of Elijah. The problem was, that those now dead prophets were the favourites of Queen Jezebel, so Elijah knew it was time for a sharp exit, and he ran as fast and as far as he could, into the wilderness.

So let's think of all that in terms of wisdom. Was it wise for Elijah, God's prophet in Israel, to stand up against so many - 450 leaders of another faith? No - probably not. Was he popular with the people of his nation for what he was standing for? Not at all. The nation was experiencing severe drought, and God had let them down. Elijah had no support at all. Not until God had been proved



to be one who answers prayer. And when that happened, they turned immediately, and there was a massacre. Was Elijah popular with the leaders of his nation? Absolutely not - King Ahab was weak, and under Jezebel's spell, and Jezebel was determined to get her revenge against Elijah. Had he been wise in the first place to stand up against the might of Jezebel and her pet prophets? Well, probably not. But Elijah lived close to God and was a prophet at a time of great difficulty in a nation whose rulers were living so far from God. Wisdom is not what is driving Elijah, but his utter commitment to God. And as a result of what happened, he just ran - he ran away from his homeland and its leaders, away from the role God had placed upon him, away from God. He was broken, defeated, sad and alone. Except Elijah was never alone, because God was right there, his constant companion.

Elijah needed to know that God was there, and so God spoke to him. I wonder about that earthquake, and wind and fire. Were they real? Or are they all that was going on in Elijah's troubled mind - the turmoil caused by the violence he had been involved in and in the potential disasters ahead of him. Elijah didn't find God powering through those whirling anxieties and fears. He found God speaking through the turmoil of his mind in a whisper - a still small voice. A voice of calm and peace in his struggles. That's what God's peace is - something that cuts through the fears and uncertainties and offers a still place in troubled and troubling times. Through the stillness of God reaching into him, Elijah was able to centre himself once more.

But this is where the wisdom of God is clear. God knew what God was doing. Elijah had been called to a role and task. And that task was not over. God knew what needed to happen next, and that he needed Elijah to perform a role within his nation. Elijah needed to align himself with God's wisdom in this, and to find the courage, to hold firm to that new stillness that he had found in that moment, and return to continue the task set before him.

God's wisdom and purpose are often far from clear to us, but they are matters we can hold fast to. Even in the dark times of pandemic and the raging of Covid-19, God is there, God is in control and God knows the way ahead. It might not be an easy way, but by receiving the peace - the still place that God gives to us - we can begin to glimpse the wisdom and purpose that is beyond ourselves. We can tune ourselves into God's wisdom, and invite God to open to us an understanding of where we are being led through these times. We do it, not from the midst of the maelstrom of the earthquake, the wind and the fire - the turmoil and uncertainties of life at present. We do it from the still place that God has ready for us, and will open to us, when we are ready to listen for his whisper cutting through our anxieties and frustrations, when we ready to place ourselves in Him.

I invite you now to listen or join into a song, based on a couple of passages from Paul's epistles, as you think about these things, then we'll turn to our second reading.



## **Song: Do Not Let Your Hearts Be Troubled**

*Do not let your hearts be troubled,  
Fear nothing, I am here,  
Peace I leave, my peace I give you,  
Trust completely, do not fear.  
Holy Spirit now your helper  
Always is by your side, with  
Confidence in anxious moments,  
Peaceful comforter and guide.*

*In all things God's goodness follows  
Those who give their lives to Him,  
In all troubled time's He's present,  
Loving, giving peace within,  
We are more than conquerors  
Through Jesus, our Saviour and so  
None can separate us from Him,  
All is safely in His hand.*

## **Reading: Matthew 14: 22 - 33**

*Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone, and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it. Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. 'It's a ghost,' they said, and cried out in fear. But Jesus immediately said to them: 'Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid.' 'Lord, if it's you,' Peter replied, 'tell me to come to you on the water.' 'Come,' he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came towards Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, 'Lord, save me!' Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. 'You of little faith,' he said, 'why did you doubt?' And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'*

Amen

In each of the gospels everything is related to what has gone before it. So in Matthew 14, Jesus has just fed 5000 people. And just before that he has received the news that his cousin and friend, John the Baptist, has been murdered by King Herod. Jesus has had a great deal of emotional turmoil to deal with, as well as a very demanding day. And now he needs to get away to be alone with God in prayer. He's not emotionally overwhelmed or on the run like



Elijah. But he knows he needs some space. So the disciples are resting on the boat, and Jesus heads up to the hills to pray.

So what wisdom and peace can we discern in this passage? Jesus clearly recognises that he needs to centre himself once more in the wisdom of God, to perhaps discern what is the next step he needs to take in his mission. He needs to seek that peace that will strength him. I wonder if he was surprised, some hours later, to find himself walking on the water out to the boat where his disciples are resting? The disciples were certainly surprised, and afraid. Who is this? Can this be Jesus, calming walking across the water, across the choppy waves as if they are no more that a gentle footpath? But Jesus is there for a purpose - God's purpose. He needs his disciples to acknowledge now that he is more than just a charismatic leader and their friend. They need to start moving towards an understanding that he is the living God amongst them. He needs them to begin to see him as he truly is. A couple of chapters later in Matthew it's report that Peter declaring Jesus to be the Messiah, and soon after that comes the transfiguration as three disciples see Jesus in all his glory. This moment, as Jesus walks to them on the Sea of Galilee is part of that process - part of God's plan to help them understand.

So what about Peter? Well, he wants to join in. There's no evidence of any wisdom in him at all, as he impetuously steps out of the boat. Yes, there is faith and trust, but it is an act of pure impulse, and he hasn't stepped very far before he realises that he is trying to do something that is beyond him. And he begins to flounder and to sink. He had courage in stepping out, and courage is always needed when we step out from place of safety into a place of uncertainty. But it wasn't a wise, carefully thought though plan - it was an act of pure impulse. Impulse is sometimes the right thing for the moment - to take action that comes right out of the heart of us, perhaps in support of another person, or in a situation where we can see no other way forward. The key to being in tune with God's wisdom, is to centre the whole of our lives on God. And invite God to generate the impulses in us that come from a real sense of his presence and purpose. Peter was a long way from being the person he later became, a man truly centred in God. Perhaps he wanted to prove to others that he had more courage and more faith than them. Who knows? But soon after he steps out he realises that this is not a safe place and he begins to sink. It is then that Jesus offers him a hand for support, and a gentle word of encouragement. He even teases him a bit; "you were doing so well - why did you falter?" And with Jesus's hold upon him, Peter finds his peace and certainty again, and the two of them step back into the boat. The disciples in that moment are able to acknowledge that Jesus is truly God amongst them.

Wisdom and peace. We so long for wisdom in our lives. We want to get things right. We want to discern the right ways forward. We want to find certainty in the wisdom of those who are advising us, and leading us. We want to be sure. But those who lead us are, without exception, fallible human beings. They too are trying to get it right, whilst dealing with a whole range of pressures and expectations. They may not be looking in the right direction to discern the best



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way, but they listen to voices all around them, pulling in this direction and that. What is wise right now is by no means easy to discern, whether it involves the nations of this world, the running of our county, or the re-opening of our churches. Even the decisions of our every day lives pose questions of wisdom - is it wise to enter this shop, or restaurant, or another person's home. Is it wise to wear a mask or not to wear a mask? Is it wise to believe that the virus is on the wane, or wise to expect its resurgence and plan for that? Perhaps you like me were shocked and extremely rattled by the re-imposing of restrictions on Greater Manchester last week.

What is wise? We just don't really know. Perhaps the only premise on which we can build our lives is the certainty that God is wise, that God has a plan and a purpose, so complex and so far-reaching that we can only begin to glimpse it. Yet we each have a part to play. So how can we centre ourselves in God's plan and purpose, in God's wisdom. Only through our willingness to commit ourselves to those things. And in our frail humanness, we need to do that often!

And what about the peace we need? Do we need to beg for it? Elijah didn't - God reached out to him through the turmoil in his life and mind and heart, and spoke a stillness that was unexpected. Peter didn't ask for peace as he found himself beginning to sink - he didn't have time - he just cried for help. And help came in the hand of Jesus reaching out to him - holding onto him - and helping him forwards. Jesus was the one who gave the peace he needed in that moment.

Can we trust in the plan and purpose - in the wisdom of God? Can we centre ourselves on those things? And have we the confidence in God to ask for that wisdom to filter down to us, as we seek to step forward - as we step onto the next wobbly stepping stone? Thankfully no one is asking us to walk on water! No one asked Peter to do that - it was his choice! But can we have the courage to step forward in God's wisdom however uncertain and uncomfortable we may feel?

And do we have sufficient trust to believe that there is a still place - a gift from God - that is ours, and will be ours, as and when we need it? That still place is real. It was real for Jesus himself. And it became very real for his disciples, increasingly so as they committed themselves to God's purpose. It has been real for generation after generation of believers. It's real for us now.

May your heart be set on God's purpose, and attune to his wisdom, and may he fill your places of turmoil, of earthquake, wind and fire, with unexpected stillness. Through that stillness, may you, may we all discern the next step, and have the courage to take it. Amen

And now our prayers, let us pray:

Calm me, Lord, as you calmed the storm, still me, Lord, keep me from harm, Let all the tumult within me cease, enfold me, Lord, in your peace.

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We pray for the leaders of the nations of this world in the decisions they take.

We pray for the leaders of our own nation, in the decisions they take.

We pray for the leaders of our local communities in the decisions they take.

We pray for the leaders of our churches in the decisions they take.

We pray for ourselves - give us wisdom: give us peace.

Calm me, Lord, as you calmed the storm, still me, Lord, keep me from harm, Let all the tumult within me cease, enfold me, Lord, in your peace. Amen

We sing our final hymn, Dear Lord and Father of mankind, forgive our foolish ways;

## **Hymn: Dear Lord and Father**

*Dear Lord and Father of mankind, forgive our foolish ways;  
Reclothe us in our rightful mind, in purer lives Thy service find,  
In deeper reverence, praise, in deeper reverence, praise.*

*In simple trust like theirs who heard, beside the Syrian sea,  
The gracious calling of the Lord, let us, like them, without a word,  
Rise up and follow Thee, rise up and follow Thee.*

*O Sabbath rest by Galilee, O calm of hills above,  
Where Jesus knelt to share with Thee the silence of eternity,  
Interpreted by love! Interpreted by love!*

*With that deep hush subduing all our words and works that drown  
The tender whisper of Thy call, as noiseless let Thy blessing fall  
As fell Thy manna down, as fell Thy manna down.*

*Drop Thy still dews of quietness, till all our strivings cease;  
Take from our souls the strain and stress, and let our ordered lives  
confess  
The beauty of Thy peace, the beauty of Thy peace.*

*Breathe through the heats of our desire thy coolness and Thy balm;  
Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire; speak through the earthquake, wind,  
and fire,  
O still, small voice of calm, O still, small voice of calm.*

I'd like to end with the words of poem entitled ' Spirit of Affirmation' by Cicely Taylor



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*I am the way that stretches out before you, I am the journey you are on,  
I am the present moment that you tread, I am the next place that you  
stand upon.*

*I am the air you breathe, I am every part and of the whole,  
I am the love you cannot fall beyond, I am the inner silence of your soul.*

*I am the question that you ask, I am the answer that you crave,  
I am the reality of truth, I am the ever-living thread that leaps the grave.*

*I am all time in now, I am this minute to begin,  
I am the one you have always known,  
I am the peace that you may dwell within.*

Amen

Great Is Thy Faithfulness - Thomas O. Chisholm

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Do Not Let Your Hearts Be Troubled - Clare Stainsby

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Dear Lord And Father Of Mankind - John Greenleaf Whittier

Music: Charles Hubert Hastings Parry (1848-1918) from the oratorio Judith

Blessing - Spirit of Affirmation - Cicely Taylor

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